



Focus

Drought in Washington State

Drought Declaration

Under Washington state law, the governor may authorize the Department of Ecology (Ecology) to issue an order declaring a drought when two circumstances exist:

1. Low anticipated stream flows ~ when the water supplies from lakes and streams are below 75 percent of normal (e.g., when snow-pack measurements show there is anticipated to be 25 percent less water in streams this year), and
2. Undue hardship ~ the shortage of water would cause an undue hardship to people.

The order activates an emergency response by the Department of Ecology to help communities, businesses and farmers that will be affected by the drought. See “Department of Ecology’s Drought Response” below for more details.

Facts of the 2001 Drought

Washington state is expected to have one of the driest summers on record. The National Weather Service reported that this is already the driest winter since 1977. Precipitation and snow-pack levels put this year among the five driest winters in the past 100 years.

March weather and snow-pack forecasts predict that Washington will have just 50 to 60 percent of normal water supplies, far below the 75 percent threshold for declaring a drought.

All people in Washington are directly or indirectly affected by a drought. A drought can result in farms and manufacturing plant workers losing their jobs and farmers not being able to plant crops. A drought can also spell disaster for recreational companies that use water (e.g., swimming pools, water parks, and river rafting companies) and for building and nursery businesses because people won’t invest in landscapes if they won’t have water to keep for plants.

Also, people could pay more for water if utility companies increase water rates. With 85 percent of Washington’s energy coming from hydroelectric plants, a drought means less inexpensive electricity coming from dams – and probably higher electric bills.

Department of Ecology’s Drought Response

By state law, when a drought emergency is declared there are three tools that are activated to help Ecology respond to the drought:

- Emergency water permits
- Financial assistance
- Temporary transfers of water rights

Emergency water permits: The permits would be for cities, businesses and farmers to withdraw water from the ground, a lake or stream to replace water that is not available because of the drought. However, because most of the water that can be used in Washington is already being used, it is very unlikely that the Department of Ecology will issue emergency water permits.

Ecology is an equal-opportunity employer

Transfer of water rights: People with existing water rights may apply for changes to those rights temporarily to help reduce the effects of the drought. A transfer (i.e., changing the *source* of the water, *where* it is used, or *how* it is used) of a water right might involve transferring a water right from one farmer to another or from one city to another.

Transferring water rights provides a great way for neighbors to help other neighbors survive the drought. The Department of Ecology actively encourages people to talk with their neighbors about who needs water and who might have some extra water to share. The Department of Agriculture and the state Conservation Commission are looking for farmers who need water or who could help other farmers. The Ecology Department will help match people who are at risk of having little or no water with other people who have more water than they absolutely need. A water-right holder might also choose to transfer his or her water to an in-stream use to help fish survive in this extra-dry year.

State law waives requirements for public notification and other environmental review. Thus, Ecology will be able to rapidly process applications and make decisions about water transfers within 15 days after receiving an application.

Financial Assistance: Approximately \$5.1 million dollars from the Drought Preparedness Account is available in grants and loans to help farmers and communities. Ecology may develop an emergency rule to get the money quickly to where it is needed most.

Enforcing water-use laws

Ecology also has other authorities and resources to make sure water is being used legally and efficiently. Some water-right holders in Washington have rights they can use until stream flows get below a certain mark. Between 1976 and 1986, Ecology set stream flows in 18 areas of the state to help protect fish and other users of water. People who received water right permits in those areas after those dates agreed to reduce or stop using water when flows get too low. This summer, many streams may meet these marks (some for the first time), and water right holders will be directed to cut back or stop using water.

Ecology also will be looking for people who are using water without water rights and directing them to stop.

Conservation

All citizens can help lessen the effects of the limited water supplies by conserving water. People can use water more efficiently in their homes, businesses and yards. Visit our drought web page at [www.ecy.wa.gov] for conservation information and links to other web sites that offer useful tips on ways your business or household can save water.

For more information

For general information about drought, visit our web page at [www.ecy.wa.gov/], or call 1-800-468-0261.

For regional information about drought, contact these Department of Ecology water resource staff:

Northwest Regional Office, Bellevue: 425-649-7020	Central Regional Office, Yakima: 509-575-2490
Southwest Regional Office, Lacey: 360-407-0240	Eastern Regional Office, Spokane: 509-456-6333

Ecology's media contact on drought: Mary Getchell, (360) 407-6157; pager (360) 534-8590

If you have special accommodation needs or require this document in an alternative format, please contact Christine Corrigan at (360) 407-6607 (voice) or (360) 407-6066 (TDD).